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Criticism and Why It Sucks (Actually, What Rhetorical Criticism Is)

To most, criticism is a negative laundry list picking apart whatever it addresses. Professional criticism is not typically seen with any higher regard, or nuance. At Berkeley, rhetorical criticism is the analysis of texts from the starting point of their rhetorical situation, paying attention to key terms like “audience,” “culture,” and “authorship.”

Per my experience, criticism here means a thorough study of the text: breaking it into its structural components to gain insights into its technical construction to then look into intended takeaways directed from rhetorical devices, but also a breakdown of cultural context surrounding the text to learn where the text may have initiated from and how its interpretations were and are highly derivational.

The “text” at Berkeley is a fearsome being, illusive in definition and almost all-encompassing. Put simply, the text is the object being critiqued and is only constrained by the rhetorical field dictating the criticism. Scholars of visual rhetoric may analyze photographs, memes, and movies. Rhetorical space can be critiqued with texts like museums and plaques (and their surrounding areas). Cultural rhetorical analyses can look at theoretical essays, essays on rhetoric, and even fictional writings that (arguably) capture the relevant zeitgeist.

There are formal definitions of the rhetorical situation dating back to the sixties, and many scholars have furthered that discussion. Effectively, the situation is the overarching personal and cultural contexts the text was created in and is in conversation with, and the

methods and materials that construct the text. Context, in the post-structuralist tradition most rhetors follow, is most important to critique or analyze to gain insights into the text itself.

Rhetorical criticism can differ in the ends to which texts are critiqued according to the rhetorical field or tradition of the critic, yet loses none of its identity as rhetorical criticism.